

Statement by
Rep. Henry A. Waxman
on the Conference Report on H. R. 1
November 21, 2003

Mr. Speaker, I strongly oppose the conference report that our Republican colleagues have brought to this House today, and I will vote against it.

Today we should be voting on legislation that makes a good prescription drug benefit a part of the Medicare program. We should give people real help, without big gaps in coverage that will require seniors and the disabled to pay thousands of dollars for drugs out of their own pockets.

Instead, this is what we've got:

--a bill that makes seniors buy private insurance to get drug coverage, or go into HMOs where they might not be able to see their own doctor

--a bill that lets insurance companies interested in their own profits decide what premium to charge, and what drugs to put in their formulary

--and a bill that will leave people holding the bag for most of their drug costs in far too many cases.

That is not what seniors and disabled people want.

This bill uses the cover of providing drug coverage—inadequate as it is—to make changes in Medicare that will end up costing people more, and taking away their choice of their doctor. I don't think seniors will see choosing which insurance company they pay their money to as a very good substitute for picking their own doctor.

This bill is based on a view that Medicare was a mistake, and that we should have left it to private insurers to provide health care for our seniors. Well, if we'd done that, we'd have an awful lot more seniors today who'd be uninsured and struggling with their medical bills.

I don't want to turn back the clock on Medicare: I want to make it better.

Much as I want prescription drug coverage for seniors, this inadequate drug benefit is not worth destroying Medicare.

I don't want a Medicare where every year it takes more and more of your Social Security check just to pay your Medicare deductible. I don't want a Medicare where seniors and disabled people have to spend a lot more *just to be able to stay in regular Medicare*.

I don't want a Medicare where seniors in Los Angeles have to pay premiums that are twice as high as premiums in some other areas of the country, and depend on private insurance companies for what benefits they get.

So you might wonder who benefits from this bill?

Not the almost 3 million retirees who will end up losing the drug coverage they have now.

Not the 6 million of the poorest seniors who end up being worse off.

Not the 40 million Medicare beneficiaries who can't use their bargaining power to get lower prices from the drug companies, like other countries do—because this bill actually *prohibits* the Secretary of HHS from negotiating for seniors.

And not the people who have been able to get their drugs cheaper by going to Canada.

It's the drug companies and insurance companies who benefit from this bill.

Let's improve Medicare, not ruin it.

Instead of spending our dollars on higher profits for them, let's spend it on a better drug benefit for America's seniors.

Defeat this bill.